

The Rural America Health Corps Act

The Need for Legislation:

One in six Americans live in rural areas. That adds up to 46 million people. Individuals living in rural areas are typically older, sicker and have poorer access to health care than their urban counterparts. Rural communities often relate how a practitioner retires and an entire community is left without health care. Rural communities also report how difficult it is to recruit and retain practitioners, which can compound economic challenges these areas face. As a result, millions of rural Americans live in shortage areas for doctors, dentists, and mental health providers.

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC) typically provides \$50,000 in loan repayment awards for a 2-year service commitment to attract clinicians to serve in communities with shortages of health professionals. However, only one-third of NHSC placements are in rural communities. After completing this 2-year commitment, too many NHSC members leave for higher-paying jobs in other areas, in part to continue paying down average medical school debts of more than \$200,000.

As part of a response to this need, we are introducing the Rural America Health Corps Act to incentivize more health professionals to serve and plant roots in rural communities.

What the Legislation Does:

The Rural America Health Corps Act directs the Secretary of Health and Human Services (“the Secretary”) to establish a demonstration program as part of the National Health Service Corps to provide payments on the principal of and interest on eligible education loans for eligible individuals.

Eligible individuals must meet the criteria for participation in the National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program as set for in section 338B of the Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C. 2541-1). In addition, eligible individuals must agree to a period of obligated service of 5 years of full-time employment in a health professional shortage area that is a rural area. The total amount of payment to any individual will not exceed \$200,000. Not later than 5 years after enactment, the Secretary shall submit a report to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions of the Senate and the Committee on Energy and Commerce of the House of Representatives.

The legislation appropriates \$50 million for this demonstration program.